

THE HARP OF THREE STRINGS

A SERMON

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1 Samuel 16: 16. *“Seek out a man who is a skilful player upon the harp; and it shall come to pass, when the evil spirit from God is upon thee, that he shall play with his hand, and thou shalt be well.”*

In spite of all that the prophet Samuel could say, the Israelites would have a king. The choice fell upon a young man by the name of Saul. His chief recommendation seems to have been his great size. “From his shoulders and upward he was higher than any of the people.” It turned out, however, as it does in so many cases, that mere height and muscle were not all that was needed to make a perfect man. Like Abraham Lincoln, this tall young king was subject to attacks of mental depression, and while he was under their spell he was good for nothing. Naturally this troubled his people. After the manner of the time, they laid his melancholy to possession by an evil spirit which God had allowed to enter him. We still keep the word, though we have changed the sense of it, as when we say that a man has a melancholy or a happy spirit. But to the men of old, possession by an evil spirit was not a mere figure of speech, and they had various means of driving the demon out. One of these was an influence which we still use for that purpose—the power of music. There was a young man, said the servants of Saul, who was a skilful player upon the harp; perhaps he would come and play for the king. So David makes

his entrance into the history where he is to act so great a part. He played before Saul, and the evil spirit departed; and whenever the besetting weakness of the mighty man came upon him, the young shepherd boy had only to bring his harp, and Saul "was refreshed and was well."

The reader of Browning recalls the picture that he drew of the gigantic figure leaning against the tent-pole, "drear and stark, blind and dumb," as the young shepherd lifts the flap of the tent and peers through the darkness. But before the reader goes on with the poet to the lesson of the sad spectacle, he feels drawn to the melancholy monarch by one touch of nature that makes the whole world kin. For the life of all men vibrates more or less often between the healthy sense of joy in living and the dull, heavy weight of life. There is a happy temperament and a sad one, but as no one is so sad that he does not have gleams of light, so no one is so vigorous as not to feel at times the coming in of the fog that makes the whole world dim. Some of the most melancholy men have the most abounding strength, and some of the happiest mortals are invalids. But to everyone in his degree the question has its point: how to cheer those dull and heavy moods which so unaccountably at times make up the inner weather. What sweet-stringed harp is there which can be played to us to drive away the evil spirit?

The ancient harp, in those primitive times when David played upon it, was an instrument of three strings. There are three ways of driving out the evil spirit of despondency.

1. The first way is to restore our connection with nature. The body and the material world belong

together. There is not an atom of the body that did not come from that world, and back to that world the whole body shall some day return. Meantime it cannot live without fresh supply and stimulus from it. In fact, the body cannot entirely escape from it. If we could rise above the thin film of atmosphere that coats the globe, we should perish at once. The earth holds us close to its bosom by the powerful arms of its gravitation, and all the centrifugal power which its whirling motion can exert does not avail to break the tie that binds the two together. The soul may go to its own place, wherever or whatever that may be, but our material frame belongs to the material world, and that world never lets go its hold.

We try to get away from nature. We build ourselves substantial houses. We fill them with ingenious protections from the heat of the sun and the cold of the frost, from the blasts of the wind and from the insidious attack of the rain. The home is our fortress against the powers of nature. But when we have finished it, and settle down in its comfort and safety, a curious weakness steals upon us. The longer we stay in this refuge the more the body loses its strength and the soul its cheerfulness. Vitality ebbs out of us, as from our old classical friend, Antaeus, when he was lifted from the earth. What is the meaning of this sinking of the spirits? *It is the homesickness of the body for the world which is its mother.*

This is the age of homes, but it is also the age of longing to get out of them. We revert to the habits of the primeval man. We long for the earth and the sea, and now we are longing for the air. We like to begin over again that struggle with the elements

that seemed to be finished long ago. We will camp out, leave our range and our furnace for the fire of logs, get wet with the rain and wrest our subsistence from the woods and the streams. We will brave the sea with our boats, as our ancestors did, and learn to paddle canoes like the savage whom our ancestors drove out. When our vacation is over we come back, aerated, sunburned, and freshened not only in body, but in mind. The homes we were so proud of we enter again with regret, and we tell over and over during the winter evenings the story of our adventures.

Meantime, with our homes as a base, we continue our excursions out into the world of nature. There are sports of fall and winter and spring. From the schoolboy to the man well into the years of decline, we play the games which take us back into the mother-world. The school and the college can hardly tear their rights away from the love of the fresh air and bodily exercise. Tens of thousands crowd to see an athletic game to hundreds or dozens who go to a debate or an oration, and to be champion in muscle is more than to be the winner of a scholar's medal. We go back to farm life for our homes, and raise crops and forests as if our existence still depended upon them, as that of our ancestors did, and the unfailing laws of demand and supply bring out when it is needed a new means of locomotion that carries us from city to suburbs in a larger radius than the horse used to cover.

The result is that life grows longer and keeps fresher, our boys are the tallest in the world, and the American temperament graduates from its nervousness

into a greater equanimity. So we have learned to play on the first string of the harp which is to drive away the evil spirit of morbid depression from our modern life — the *return to nature*.

II. The second string is the *return to man*. The roots of much of our unhappiness run down into selfishness. There is no more fertile soil for the seeds of melancholy than the habit of brooding over our own disappointments and failures, or over those which we fear we may have. Self-absorption is the straight road to some forms of insanity. It is often remembered that they were preceded by a narrowing concentration upon the patient's own affairs, his business or his health. The most dreadful punishment of criminals is said to be solitary confinement, in which they are shut into themselves, with nothing but blank walls around them and no sound of voice or sight of face to show that any other human being exists on the earth. Carried far enough, this drives the man into hopeless idiocy. But not very different is the solitary confinement that a man may inflict upon himself, by brooding more and more exclusively upon his own interests and fears, and seeing nothing in any other life to gain his attention, still less attract his sympathy. There are men and women who cannot forget the misfortunes that have happened to them or be brought to realize that these are but instances of what befall multitudes of people. Their thoughts revolve about their losses or their mistakes in ever narrowing circles, till their misfortune becomes their world, in which they live and move and have their being. Such narrow minds shrink more and more, growing more and more unhappy till at last that

which might have been but a natural and temporary depression becomes an irretrievable sinking into a life of gloom.

The selfishness of disappointment is always sad to see, but it is never so pitiful as when it comes after the sorrow of bereavement. We may make all due allowance for the exhaustion of long watching of the sick and of the alternation of hope and fear, and for the stunning blow that fell at last. But to come out of all these deep experiences more narrow, self-absorbed, and cold of heart seems a dreadful loss of the soul's opportunity. Yet there are such miserable lives, that revolve around and around their bitter lives, always facing in to the centre of the circle, as into the vortex of a maelstrom where their ship went down. It seems almost unjust to blame them. Who of us would dare to say that he could stand the test any better? But there are those who have done this. We come upon men and women from whose faces the vivacity of joy and hope has faded out, and whom we instantly suspect to have passed through some dreadful trial. But they are not depressed. They do not appear to have been subdued by whatever the trial has been. The careless joy of the untried heart has gone, the look of those who take happiness and success for granted has vanished. But in its place, like that rich and quiet light that pours across the landscape as the sun nears its setting, has come the glow of a new sympathy, the most beautiful expression that ever rests upon the human face. They have come out of the loneliness of their individual experience into the acquaintance with the great brotherhood of sorrow. They have turned

back to the life of the world, from which at first their main desire was to escape, with a new sense of the value of life. If they cannot share its careless and shallow joy, they can share the experience of pain and loneliness, and by sharing become able to minister to it. "Do you ask what consolation for human ills the new religion will offer," says the most beautiful passage in a lecture by one who seems to feel obliged to lay aside the comfort which used to be drawn from belief in a future life. "I answer, the consolation that often comes to the sufferer from being more serviceable to others than he was before the loss or the suffering for which consolation is needed; the consolation of being one's self wiser and tenderer than before, and therefore more able to be serviceable to human life in the best ways." So a great man touched, and all may touch, the second string in the harp that charms away the evil and useless mood. As one who pines and weakens in the warm, close atmosphere of the house is cheered by the return to *nature*, so he who pines and weakens in the narrow brooding of his sorrow is cheered by the return to *man*.

III. The third string in the harp that drives away our unhappy moods is the string of faith — *the return to God*. That has already been vibrating when we have touched the other two cords, as all the strings in the piano are stirred, whenever we sound any one of them. It is the best side of the return to nature that we have come, in these latter days, not merely upon many beautiful and useful facts here and there, but upon the signs of one all-pervading and all-moving Power. In all the riot of the storm and the earthquake we know now that the

hand of law never looses its grip. There is nothing so apparently insignificant or so domineering in the world of matter that it is not under the control of an almighty, though unseen, hand. All the forces that appear to struggle with each other are really working together at "some far-off divine event to which the whole creation moves." And when we make our return to man and find how the storm that swept over our personal life and seemed to leave only ruin in its track, has really made us better able to serve the world in which we live, we feel ourselves in the hands of the Power that governs and directs the gale. Now it is for us to separate this new sense of God from special "divine judgments" and isolated experiences, and erect it into a general and abiding faith for the comfort and the strengthening of our whole life.

For the worst side of the experience of misfortune is the sense of worthlessness. We have come to feel ourselves caught in irresistible currents of force that sweep through the world on some unknown errand or on no errand at all, but only as the sport of chance. We had thought ourselves of some importance in the world and entrusted with ability to accomplish something worth doing. But now we find that we are but chips on the current of some unknown and to us useless purpose, or adrift on the monotonous tides that swing back and forth on an ocean that has no purpose at all.

Thus we wake to see that by our very misfortune we have had the opportunity of new strength opened to us, and even have had a new work given us in which to use that strength. We can do something for our neighbor or for society which we could not

have done without what seemed to be an arbitrary and useless calamity. So we are of consequence in the world after all! God had us most in mind when He seemed most to overlook us! That is the beginning, the seed, of faith, and if we let it grow to its natural and logical height we find the dignity and glow of life coming back. The sense of being a child of God, whom our Father never forgets and never lets go out of His sight, even in our misfortunes, takes the place of the sense of aimless and uncared for floating upon the ocean of chance. The appetite for life comes back to us. Just as we were refreshed by getting out of the close atmosphere and narrow range of our homes into the great currents of life that flow through the material world, just as we are cheered by getting out of our useless and debilitating brooding over our individual disappointment into the larger opportunities and activities of the human world, so we are made men again by breaking out of our dismal sense of worthlessness into the large companionship of the Divine Love and Fatherhood. The harp is complete. The return to nature, and the return to man, find their harmony filled out by the return to God.

But this is a faith that we must guard from attaching itself again to some particular ambition of ours. It is the large atmosphere that we need to keep in mind, the general bracing and toning effect of faith itself. The man who finds himself growing weak and depressed in the house says to himself that he will go out and play golf. He goes and plays badly. Perhaps there is nothing of equal unimportance in itself that so depresses a grown and capable man

as an unlucky day at golf. Men who can stand hard experiences in business have been known almost to weep over the vicissitudes of that singular sport. It is because our friend has forgotten the reasons why he went out to play. It was not primarily to make a good score, though that would add to the good effect of the day off. It was to get health, to feel the sun on his face and the soft turf under his feet, to live in the larger world and to breath the unconfined air. The philosophy of the game is to stop the bitter regret over the lengthening score, and to thank God for such a beautiful world and such a life-giving atmosphere. Then the player comes back to work with the best kind of success — the redder blood and the clearer brain and the sweeter temper.

As he takes up his working life again, let him carry the same philosophy through all its experiences. Let him not underrate the joy of a good score in life. Let him make it as good as he can. It is worth working and studying hard for. But let him not pin his faith in the worth of life to any mere score. Tomorrow it may be better. Perhaps it will not be. Life is an uncertain thing to the best of us. But faith is something larger than the joy of having done this or that. It is the breathing of the pure air of confidence in the value of life. It is the tingling sense of joy in exercise, whatever be its outcome. It is the child's delight in living, that wakes every morning sure that the day will be worth having and dissolves in sleep at night with the confidence that tomorrow will be just as full of joy as today has been. We soon cease to be children in the human sense of the word, but we ought never to cease to be and to feel that we are

children of God. That is the true faith — not confidence in this or that venture, but trust that whatever happens, we may grow stronger and more useful.

There is a beautiful poem by Henry Newbolt that shows this joy in life even in death. An English officer falls in with a band of robbers in the north of India and kills five of them. The rest overpower him by nightfall, and tell him that he shall die at day-break. He climbs the hill and sits all night looking off into space. He does not hear the river flow beneath, or see the stars, or the ghostly snow on the mountain peaks. He sees his own life as it has been, his home in England, the gray little church, the school and its game, the college and its crew, the great steamer that brought him to India. Thus, as morning dawns, he goes down again to the camp and his murderers close in around him. He looks his last upon the splendid world, and all the memories of his night-watch melt together into one vision of life itself.

"O glorious Life, who dwellest in earth and sun,
I have lived, I praise and adore Thee."

One thinks of that brave old apostle, writing his epistle to his young friend Timothy from the Roman prison where he was soon to die. It was not this or that which he had done that filled his mind when he was ready to be offered and the time of his departure was at hand, but the feeling that life itself had been worth living. "I have fought a good fight, I have *kept the faith*." In such a life there could be no lasting despondency. The soul may sink, like the wave, into hollows here and there, but only to rise the higher and flash the more brightly in the light of heaven.

